

Bifurcating

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I was sixteen the first time I stepped into a strip club. The threat of parental disownment loomed over me from a young age, creating an almost obsessive concern with labor and income.

“Get out and never come back” was repackaged in myriad ways. Sometimes, it was those exact words. Sometimes, it was my little brother’s toys piled into trash bags with threats of being kicked to the curb. Sometimes, it looked like physical violence. Once, my uncle forced me to watch as he tortured his own son—punishment for my failure to adhere to the strict Catholic code of femininity in which we were steeped. It was also a warning: conform or *get out and never come back*.

Although I started working at the age of fourteen—seven, actually, if I include uncompensated childcare and the emotional labor of protecting my newborn brother from our parents’ drunken brawls—I never amassed enough cash for an apartment deposit. As such, I was perennially suspended between here and there.

The threat of disownment and subsequent fears about self-sustainability are omnipresent even now as an adult, and the sex industry remains the careful arms into which I fall. This is my contradiction—the thing that most alienates me is also my reprieve from alienation.

THE STRIP CLUB manager was nothing more than a sentient patina of slime, a thick moss grown from years in the moist shade of greed and entitlement. A cloud of cigarette smoke hung over him with a darkness in his eyes that I would later see in myself. He took my baby fat and fake ID as an invitation to humiliate. “What are your favorite sex toys?” he asked. “What’s your favorite sex position? You spit or swallow, baby?”

I was a virgin.

Leaving smaller than when I had entered, I decided to get a job washing dishes instead. I showed up to my first dishwashing shift in a floor-length pink dress from Goodwill, which was the source of even more humiliation. Somewhere along the line, I was told that one must look sophisticated at work, and the pink dress was the most sophisticated thing that I owned.

As I attempted to carve out space for myself in the workplace, I quickly learned that it didn’t matter if the workplace commodified femininity or devalued it; either way, men orchestrated the work.

I wouldn’t be brave enough to set foot in another strip club for a few years. But when I did, I found home: women—lots of women. It wasn’t that this home was unproblematic. The women had scars. It was patriarchal and abusive in all the ways that my childhood home had been. But at least in my chosen home, the women were brave enough to name things: bad dates, time wasters, undercovers, sleazebags, dirty managers ... thieves.

I learned how to hustle. More importantly, I learned how to take what has always been rightfully mine—what has always been rightfully *ours*. I took it and apologized to no one. I learned how to break a man’s nose in one fell swoop. I was Dotty on stage and Jenny in the sheets. I was Juniper on paper and Jennifer in lineups, and somehow all of that felt unbending and unwavering. I was a wide-eyed midwestern girl, eager to learn. I was a multiplicity, but not yet bifurcated. I wasn’t yet a mother.

Graying with the age of a life a little more than half gone, in *Feminism and Marxism*, feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith identified what is known as the “bifurcation of consciousness.” Women, suspended between our own truths and those “realities” imposed upon us by men, are forced to reconcile the contradiction between the two. We have insight into patriarchal ways of knowing while sometimes also knowing that our empirical realities are much different. Patriarchal ways of knowing further bifurcate women’s consciousness by chopping us up into digestible versions of our-selves—we are either Madonnas or Whores. We are either public property or the singular property of a man.

Of course, patriarchal values do not just penetrate masculinity. People of all genders are susceptible to its charms. But for those of us who straddle identities of Mother and Whore simultaneously, the demand to bifurcate one’s consciousness is even more profound.

Over the years, eagerness turned to resentment. A pregnancy turned into a botched abortion and a lover turned into an abuser. So I ran away to the desert. I ran until I was pregnant, again.

The Mojave had suffered a spasm of blossom, which was preter-naturally beautiful even as it signaled grave environmental decay in the desert. I was blossoming too, and decaying somehow.

The sunrise in Las Vegas is bookended by replicas of replicas, what sociologist Jean Baudrillard identified as simulacra, a

culture of infinite regress where the world rests on the back of a turtle who is herself atop another turtle. *Turtles all the way down*. On speedy nights saturated in booze and cigarettes and the kind of loop-de-loop rooftop monologues that accompany such dreamy conditions, I wondered aloud if the sunrise was, in fact, real. “In the future, they will knock down mountains to build casinos that look like mountains,” I told my lover.

There was a particular sunrise, though, that swam in with the silence of stilted mornings and I knew at that moment I was pregnant. It had become intolerable to swing around a stripper pole. It felt like gravity was swallowing my swollen breasts. I’d convinced myself up until this point that my body was simply gearing up for an epic period or perhaps just tired from all the drugs. My lover was strung out beside me.

I can say with unwavering certainty that until this particular moment, the series of events I called “living” were merely loose ends, tied together with prurient, fleeting, and bodily interests. They suddenly seemed meaningless when measured against the pulsating anticipation of my child. And then, the emergent question—Mother *or* Whore? Was I a collection of seedy underbelly stories? Or an angelic mother, reborn with purpose?

I could no longer strip on a stage, so I marketed my pregnant body. I advertised my breast milk as a fetish but quickly recoiled from the enterprise upon meeting a man who wanted to make me his “submissive pregnant slave.” He detailed his fantasy: as his slave, I would offer up my engorged tits whenever he pleased, from which he’d take his fill. I would bear his children and we—our children and me—would be his property.

My maternal body was still whorish to this man, still property. Sliced down the center of my personhood, I was to become singularly owned like a Madonna but publicly available like a Whore. It is this cultural inability to see sex working mothers as committed to our children *first and foremost*—this cultural desire that instead sees Whores as *Whores* first—that causes so much pain and aggression against our bodies and being.

BIFURCATION IS A form of violence. It shrinks femininity in size and raises it in pitch. We are asked to be accommodating, but to raise our voices an octave or two. Sex working parents are told, *Shrink your infinite unknowability for the pleasure of men or for the raising of your babies!* Bifurcation asks, *Does your body produce property inheritors, or does it produce pleasure?* It cannot produce both.

Sex workers have always produced pleasure—not pleasure for ourselves, of course, but for those who seek our services. Feminist movements have largely ignored sex workers for this reason—many assume that women who commercialize their bodies for pleasure are complicit in violence against other women. This approach assumes that sex workers are to blame for their own bifurcation. Sex working mothers are twice bifurcated, then. First as unsavory women, and then, in the eyes of other women, as administrators of pain through the production of pleasure.

All of that happens in theory. In practice, this looks like sex working mothers losing their children to the state or to violent partners. It looks like sex working mothers engaging in riskier sex for fewer resources. It looks like sex working mothers leaving behind children, either through death or jail time or both. It looks like the ultimate form of violence: a fleshy, mental, and metaphysical kind of violence that burrows so deep it is reborn again and again in the cells of our children’s children’s children.

I AM A sort of tragicomical stereotype. I was sexually abused as a child, later abandoned, and repeatedly traumatized. I am unapologetic about my former drug use; I still occasionally take mushrooms because, *fuck it*. I have no qualms admitting that I downed a bunch of speed after defending my PhD dissertation. I am twice divorced. I am a mother.

I am the fucking personification of a cautionary tale.

The mixture of abuse, drugs, sex work, and motherhood makes a lot of people uncomfortable for many of the same reasons that sex workers are left out of mainstream movements toward mitigating violence against women: too much baggage ostensibly signals to civilians that perhaps sex workers are partially responsible for the ways we have been harmed. Sex working mothers are allowed social capital only if we renounce our multilayered experiences. It is a secular form of penance: the Mother must reject the Whore, and all her agency in her whoring, in order to be legally and socially accepted—*acceptable*—as Mother. We cannot say, “I took drugs to ease the pain” or “I sold sex to live” because a woman’s pain, just like her will to survive, might implicate a man.

And so bifurcation is mandatory. We bifurcate our consciousness and split womanhood right down the center into “pure” women who can lay claim to victimization and “bad” women who cannot.

PETITE JASMINE WAS just one example of a “bad” woman. She worked as a full-service sex worker in Sweden and despite the father of her children having a collection of domestic violence charges, he was awarded sole custody of their children when the pair split. The court commented that working as an unapologetic sex worker was evidence enough of

Jasmine's parental unfitness. She could not lay claim to victimization at the hands of her former partner just as she could not lay claim to her own children. Her refusal to bifurcate her consciousness cost her not only her offspring but her life. Jasmine's former partner and father to her children murdered her shortly after being awarded custody.

I knew this story, and other cautionary tales that sex workers share in the silence of our own homes, when I chose the man who would later become the father of my child. I knew all of these stories when the Mojave was exploding in blossom, when he lay trembling at my side, when my unborn child announced their presence under a desert morning sun.

I called another sex working friend and mother to say, "Holy fuck, girl. I'm pregnant." She had just one reply. "You better make sure he won't take you to court for being a whore."

Two short years after the birth of my child, I was told that the conservative midwestern court system would undoubtedly use my sex work as evidence of parental unfitness.

DISSOCIATION FEELS LIKE sinking inside yourself, watching as your flesh is suspended between two planes of reality; men are often the architects of these planes. Dissociation feels like being a citizen of nowhere, exposed to the elements of lawlessness as your body gets tangled up in things you don't understand. It's when you can *feel* the bifurcation.

"Are you now or have you ever been a prostitute?" the lawyer asked.

I fell silent and she repeated herself.

"I said, *Are you now or have you ever been a prostitute?*"

BAUDRILLARD ENJOYED Las Vegas, that impossible desert town, the way it seemed to unfold just for him, a submissive slave of a town, pregnant. Casino girls and LSD, the stifling brass body of the desert lends itself to an unlikely expansion. This place is not supposed to exist, but it does, so the people who live or visit or play under its canopy either expand or contract with the unlikeliness of it all. For Baudrillard, it was easy to sway with this impossibility. A writer and philosopher, language was the tool with which he explored the world, a world where he was an uncontested citizen. On the other side of the globe, Dorothy Smith felt language itself prosthetic—not unlikely, but unreal. For Smith, language was not a casino built to resemble a mountain. Language was, in the first place, a destruction of the natural landscape.

We must make space for the feminine self that is both agent and victim, empowered and marginalized, Mother and Whore all at the same time. We must interrogate space and language as static and as neutral. We must dismantle the imperative to squeeze women into a singular point of existence, whether that point is sexual or maternal or something else entirely. If we are coerced into choosing between Mother *or* Whore, then our complexity is whittled down and the beneficiary of that belittling is patriarchal. If we are left out of conversations about violence, then it is assumed we cannot be victims of violence.

I AM INFINITELY unknowable like the dark and scarred crevasses of my body.

I have been harmed by men; I have loved them.

My body has been a space of both creation and destruction, sometimes at the exact same time.

I endure the threat of violence, even as some feminists claim that I am immune to pain.

I endure.

I am Mother *and* Whore.